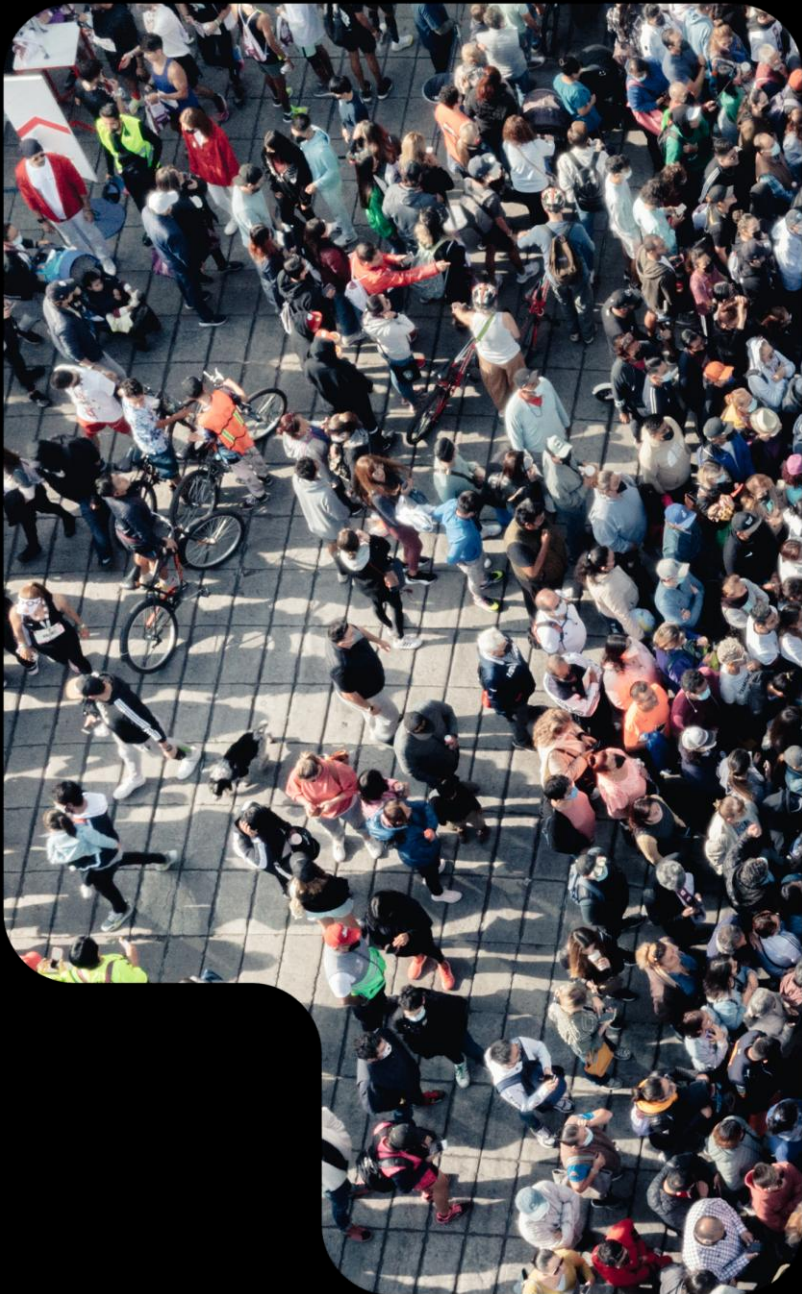




# **RISK, REPUTATION AND REWARD:**

**A GLOBAL TRENDS REPORT**





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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**With 2025 in the rearview mirror, business leaders are now firmly focused on the year ahead.**

Many of the likely challenges can, with some degree of confidence, be predicted. Others will take us by surprise.

Grayling's Global Trends Report aims to highlight some of the risks, and opportunities, confronting businesses in today's volatile and hyper-connected world – and help to hone corporate and media strategies.

It highlights how geopolitical tensions, notably Russia's war on Ukraine, the US/China rivalry and US ambitions in South America and beyond, will continue to weigh on the global economy while the policies of governments, especially across the EU, will add to the backdrop of rising costs and fiscal uncertainty.

The reputational risks posed by our ever-growing reliance on artificial intelligence adds another dimension of risk while a rapidly evolving and increasingly fragmented media landscape will elevate the need for agile and focused strategies.

Meanwhile, after a year in which the crippling impact of cyber attacks was laid bare, research by Grayling shows that four in five business leaders remain deeply concerned about digital security.

It is interesting that 62% of business leaders believe threats to business will increase in 2026 and yet nearly 85% feel very or somewhat optimistic about their business's growth prospects, with those in the UK, Spain, Germany and US among the most bullish.

I hope that this year's Trends report helps to inform and shape your strategy in the coming year and please do not hesitate to get in touch with any questions or comments.

Wishing you a successful year,

**Richard Jukes**



“

**The outlook is complex and despite acknowledgement of risk businesses remain optimistic they will grow - focus, reputation and resilience will define how true that turns out to be.**

”

**Richard Jukes**  
Global CEO, Grayling

# POLITICAL RISK

## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

**From geopolitical tensions and military conflicts to economic instability and social unrest, perhaps the only certainty in 2026 is uncertainty.**

Businesses face a suite of ever-evolving risks and it will be crucial to look ahead, anticipate threats and plan accordingly. On the international stage, expect the shifting tectonic plates of geopolitics to contribute to further volatility in supply chains and costs.

Russia's war in Ukraine will continue to weigh on the global economy, while the potential for escalating conflicts in regions such as the Middle East and South America and growing tensions between China and Japan over Taiwan could further undermine global stability. When it comes to the US and China, the dust has settled on a tussle over tariffs but the threat to international trade will continue to evolve as strategic competition plays out in 2026 and beyond.

Across Europe, Grayling sees a shifting political landscape that is likely to become more fragmented amid signs of social unrest. The rise of far-right and far-left parties and an increasingly divisive tone of political discourse point to potential upheaval in the regulatory environment in which businesses operate.

In short, politics matters, and the need to anticipate change with a clear plan is non-negotiable for businesses.







**55%**

of business leaders feel their current government is supportive of business

**18%**

a notable minority in both the US (18%) and France (17%) report no perceived regulatory uncertainty

**33%**

of business leaders cite government regulatory and policy changes as a top threat to business in 2026 (highest-ranked threat overall)

“

**Europe's political environment is more fragmented, cost-sensitive and exposed to shocks than in previous cycles.** For business, effective public affairs engagement is now essential to manage regulatory uncertainty and uneven implementation across the EU.

**Jessica Brobald**  
Managing Director, Grayling Brussels

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**30%**

of CEE leaders cite government regulatory and policy changes, and 30% cite financial pressures as top threats.

**86%**

of CEE business leaders responding to our survey feel confident in their ability to navigate threats to their businesses in 2026.

**39%**

In the CEE region of business leaders consider the EU as the source of regulatory uncertainty, more so than their national government (32%).

## CEE MARKET PERSPECTIVE

The CEE region's political and regulatory environment varies across markets. Many of these relatively young democracies face periodic political turbulence and weaker institutional resilience, while the proximity to war continues to cast a shadow over business sentiment. 2026 will be shaped by a heavy election calendar – national elections in Hungary and Slovenia, presidential elections in Bulgaria, and local contests in Czechia, Slovakia, and Slovenia – adding policy uncertainty and scrutiny.

Although several national governments maintain business-friendly policies (e.g. tax incentives for large foreign investments in manufacturing and major employers), targeted state interventions persist and are likely to continue in selected sectors, such as windfall taxes in energy and finance. Businesses must navigate fragmented political dynamics and prepare for geopolitical shocks that can disrupt operations and investment. Confidence in managing these risks is broadly strong, yet views on government support and regulatory clarity diverge across countries.



**In 2026, volatility is the baseline.**

Those who anticipate, adapt and align their communications with trust will turn uncertainty into a competitive advantage.

**Nataša T. Štambak**  
Managing Director  
Grayling CEE







“

Those who engage early in policy alignment in **defence, energy transition and cybersecurity** will be the primary beneficiaries of Poland's security-driven investment cycle.

**Klara Banaszewska**  
General Manager  
Grayling Poland

”

#### POLISH MARKET PERSPECTIVE

**Poland operates in a context of sustained geopolitical tension driven by Russia's war in Ukraine, the Russia–China axis, and uncertainty around long-term US engagement. Domestic political polarization fuels regulatory volatility, while fluctuating relations with Ukraine create openings for disinformation.**

Structural challenges such as demographic decline and labour shortages add economic pressure. At the same time, significant opportunities emerge in defence, dual-use technologies, energy transition, infrastructure upgrades and cybersecurity, demanding early business positioning and strong government engagement.

# MEDIA LANDSCAPE

## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

**Media fragmentation has fundamentally changed how influence is built and tested.**

Journalists remain important, but online creators, podcasters, and platform-native voices now shape public narratives at scale, often setting the agenda before traditional outlets respond. There's another critical factor: algorithms that now determine what content surfaces, and what spreads, with speed often outpacing verification.

In response, many organizations are optimising for reach and efficiency to remain visible in crowded feeds. But visibility alone no longer sustains influence. Credibility, trust, and message consistency are increasingly fragile as misinformation spreads and context erodes.

Success in 2026 will depend on balancing scale with credibility, and earning influence through clarity, consistency, and disciplined engagement rather than volume alone.







44%

of business leaders state expanding reach across online media channels as a media strategy goal

20%

only 1/5 believe **traditional** print media is the most effective channel for communicating to their key audiences

9%

less than 1/10 business leaders globally say building strong relationships with journalists is a key media goal for 2026

“

**Media fragmentation is widely understood, but the priority is clear:** organisations must think beyond reach to ensure they are discoverable, credible, and consistent in environments shaped by media and algorithms.

**Esty Pujadas**  
CEO, North America,  
Grayling

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“

**Despite trust challenges and political influence**, CEE offers untapped opportunities for brands to innovate through emerging channels – podcasts, short video platforms, and creator partnerships.

**Anna Balíčková**  
Managing Director  
Grayling Czech Republic & Slovakia

”

**49%**

of CEE business leaders say “expanding reach across online channels” is their primary media strategy for 2026, led by Hungary (60%) and Poland (57%).

**37%**

say Facebook is still considered the most important channel for communicating business news in CEE.

**14%**

LinkedIn is notably underused in CEE, with the exception of Romania (27%).

## CEE MARKET PERSPECTIVE

**The CEE media environment is fragmented, platform-diverse, and deeply market-specific. Facebook remains a dominant channel for business communication, while specialist trade media plays an outsized role in reaching decision-makers.**

Alternative formats such as podcasts and AI-generated summaries are gaining traction, driven by audiences seeking immediacy and convenience. Trust in news is eroding and generally lower than in Western Europe, except in Poland, where confidence remains relatively high. Political influence over media varies across the region, but trends point toward increasing polarisation, government pressure, and self-censorship. Recent bans on political advertising by Meta and Google may ease distortions in advertising markets, for instance in Romania, Croatia, and Czechia, and particularly in Hungary where political ad spending has been significant.



## POLISH MARKET PERSPECTIVE

Poland's media landscape is rapidly shifting towards digital, with traditional publishers focusing on online growth while competing with AI-driven platforms. As reliance on generative summaries grows, media outlets lose organic traffic.

This drives clickbait content, despite declining consumer tolerance. A shift from volume-based reach to subscription models is emerging, with strong growth in on-demand streaming and user-generated content, especially among younger audiences. For PR, this means delivering concise angles, credible experts, proprietary data and multimedia-ready assets. Strong relationships and tailored narratives aligned with local insights are essential in an increasingly crowded digital environment.



“

**To stand out, brands must focus on delivering tailored content** backed by credible expertise and data, leveraging local insights and high quality multimedia formats.

**Izabela Wójtowicz**  
Account Director  
Grayling Poland

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# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

**The global evolution of AI gathers pace and while mainstream integration of the technology is set to expand in 2026, the rate and depth of adoption will vary significantly between countries.**

In the US, the Trump administration has made it a priority to lead and win the AI race to protect economic competitiveness and national security, with huge investments in key sectors, including technology and energy.

Grayling research suggests the vast majority (87%) of business leaders are trialling or integrating AI into their business amid expectations that the technology will fundamentally change their industry's competitive landscape by 2029.

However, concerns over privacy, impact on jobs, and ethical use of the technology look set to temper AI adoption with integration in sensitive areas such as digital identification delayed across the EU until December 2027.

Regardless of where in the world you operate, artificial intelligence will transform how businesses and brands reach and engage their audience.

Ranking high in AI recommendations as SEO evolves into Generative Engine Optimization must become a priority, alongside being ready for heightened scrutiny when it comes to ethical use of AI and striking the right balance between AI-generated and original content.







**87%**

of business leaders claim to be trailing or implementing AI in some way into their business, with a belief that AI will fundamentally change their industry's competitive landscape in the next 3.5 years, on average.

**41%**

cite integrating AI into legacy systems (41%) as the top barriers to larger-scale AI adoption include, followed by skills gaps (35%)

**62%**

feel concerned about the reputational risks AI poses to their business.

**“**

**The greatest AI risk isn't getting it wrong - it's moving too slowly.** In a moment of rapid change, complacency looks like leadership failure, and that's the reputational cost businesses can't afford.

**Nathan Kemp**  
Global Chief Innovation Officer  
Grayling

**”**



**If SEO was about ranking, GEO is about credibility.** In order not to risk becoming excluded from the conversation, brands must have a trustworthy and credible digital footprint for AI to cite from.

**Robert Škunca**  
Managing Director  
Grayling SEE Region



## CEE MARKET PERSPECTIVE

Similarly to the rest of the EU, in CEE there is high trust in the use of AI at work – between 55% and 73% of people view AI positively in the workplace according to Eurostat.

National governments see AI as a lever for productivity and accelerated economic development, while regulatory frameworks struggle to keep pace with technological change. Regulatory fragmentation, combined with capability gaps, means most companies remain in the experimental phase rather than scaling AI solutions. Those that integrate governance, transparency, and talent development will be best positioned to turn AI into a competitive advantage.

**62%**

of CEE business leaders are concerned about reputational risks posed by AI. However, in Romania and Croatia, half of the respondents were not concerned (47% and 50%).

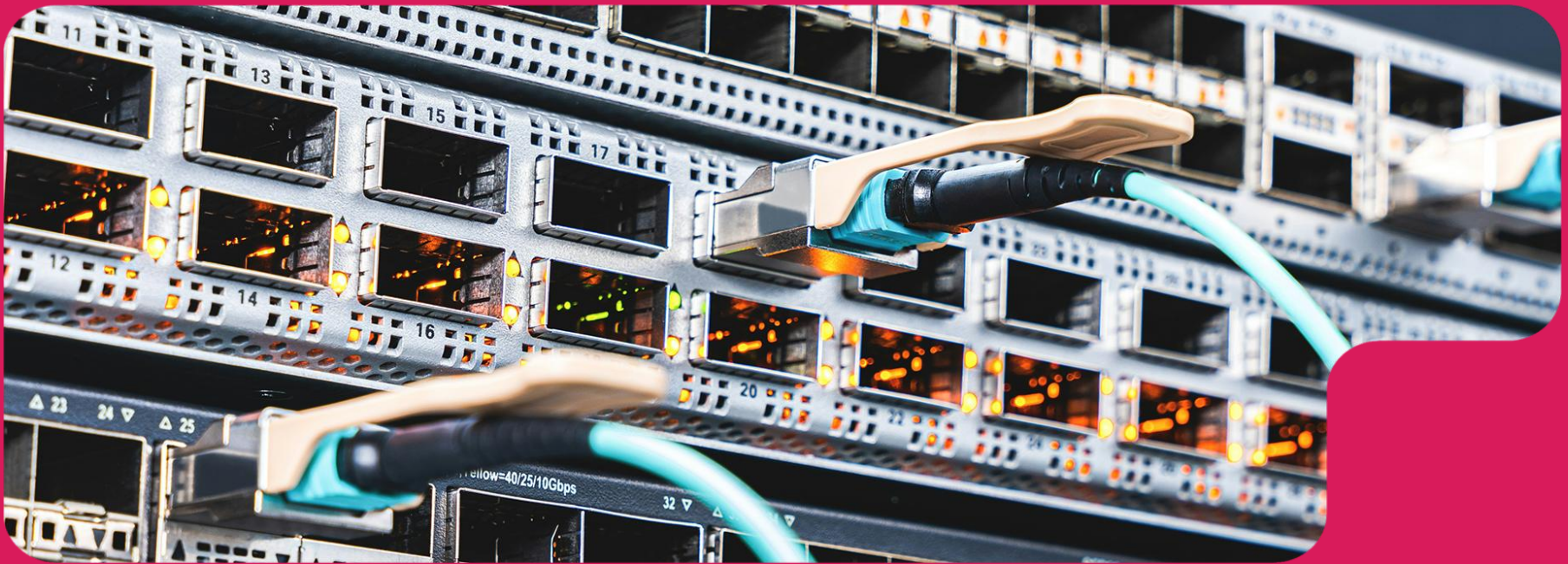
**44%**

stated they are running small, isolated AI experiments, led by Hungary where 70% of business leaders indicate active pilot projects.

**37%**

Skills gaps (37%), integration challenges (36%), regulatory uncertainty (29%) and financial burdens (28%) are the top barriers to scaling AI in CEE.





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**Organizations that combine technological adoption with cultural readiness will not only mitigate risk but also capture growth in a market where perception moves faster than innovation.**

**Jacek Borowiec**  
Account Manager  
Grayling Poland

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#### POLISH MARKET PERSPECTIVE

**AI in Poland is shifting from curiosity to strategic necessity, but adoption remains fragmented. The main challenges are organisational culture, leadership and governance rather than technology itself. Without strong ethical frameworks, companies risk employee anxiety and public scepticism.**

At the same time, major investments position Poland to become a regional AI hub. Success depends on integrating AI into core strategy, strengthening workforce capabilities and building transparent governance that enhances resilience and credibility.

# CONSUMER TRUST & BRAND LOYALTY

## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

**The relationship between brands and customers has arguably never been more fragile and as we head into 2026, building and maintaining trust is one of the biggest challenges for businesses.**

The cost-of-living crisis has placed a new premium on price and brands are under the microscope like never before as supply chains, working conditions and environmental impact are scrutinised by customers.

Those that connect with their audience on a firm footing of shared values and transparency, driven by campaigns that tap into genuine, human-centric experiences, stand the best chance of success.

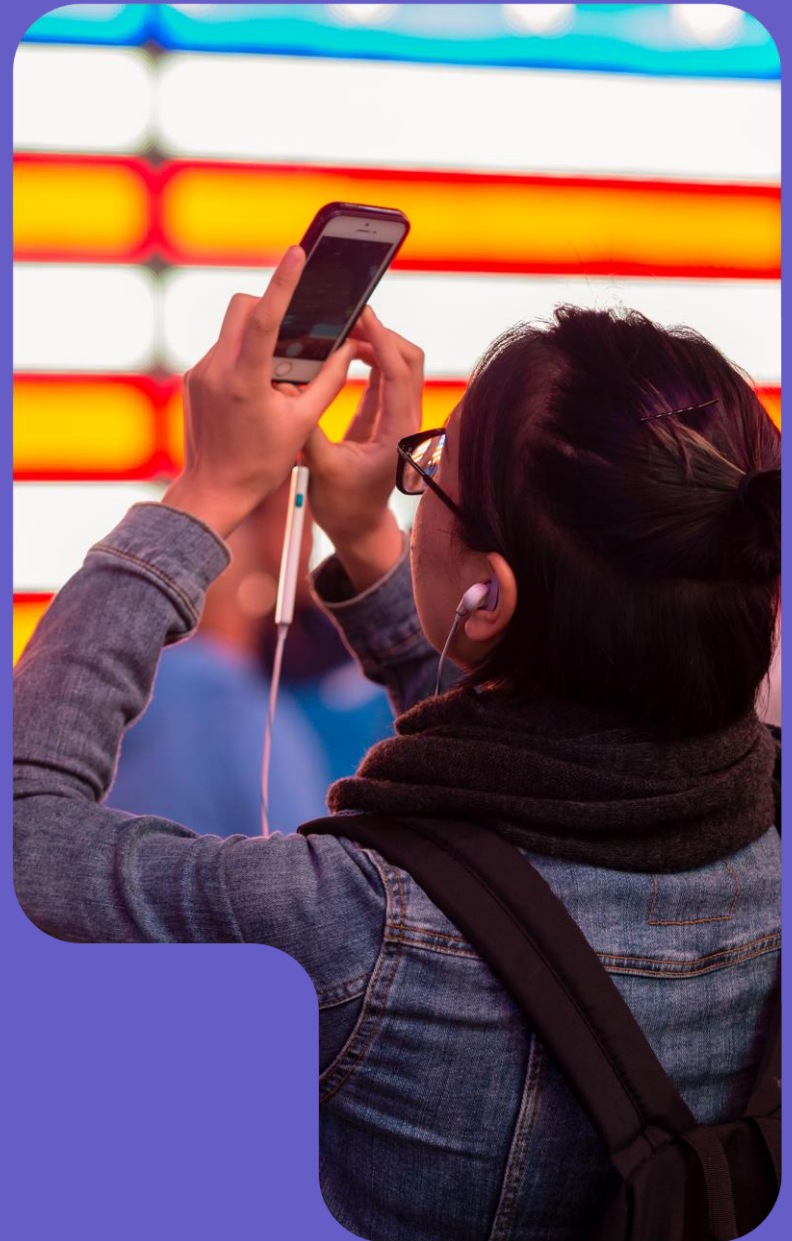
But rhetoric alone will not be enough.

Companies need to ensure full alignment between business practices and brand messaging to succeed in a market where consistency and accountability are non-negotiable.

In addition, AI technology is profoundly shaping how consumers discover and engage with brands in the digital space with optimised searches that recommend the most trustworthy and reputable.

As ever, a balance will need to be struck.

With reputation driving revenue, companies must balance technology with ethical, consistent, and human storytelling to gain a competitive edge.



90%

of business leaders say reputation has a direct impact on their bottom line

45%

business leaders cite customer ratings/reviews as the top factor for strong brand reputation, followed by business ethics (42%)

69%

agree that consumers are swayed by companies' leaders' when judging their reputation

“

**Transparency and shared values are the currency of consumer loyalty.** Brands that authentically align their actions with their promises - and can prove it - will thrive where others struggle to survive in today's scrutiny-driven marketplace.

**Danny Tan**  
Managing Director  
Grayling Singapore

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**Emotional loyalty is a strategic differentiator.** Businesses must combine transparency, authenticity, and stakeholder engagement to create trust, stability, and lasting competitive advantage in volatile markets.

**Gilia Craciun**

Head of Corporate & Financial Communications  
Grayling Romania

”

**59%**

of CEE business leaders believe reputation influences customer decisions “very much”.

**53%**

cite customer reviews and ratings are the top factor shaping brand reputation in CEE, followed by business ethics (35%) and transparency of communication (29%).

**72%**

agree the cost-of-living crisis reduces selectiveness about reputation, with 100% of Hungarian respondents in agreement.

## CEE MARKET PERSPECTIVE

Across CEE, consumer trust is increasingly shaped by customer reviews and ratings, ethical behaviour, and transparent communication rather than traditional brand messaging.

While cost-of-living pressures reduce short-term selectiveness, reputation continues to influence purchasing decisions and financial performance and there are growing expectations for brands to “do more good”. As businesses anticipate greater exposure to reputational risk, continuous monitoring and proactive reputation management will be essential to maintaining consumer confidence.



“

**Brands that embrace authenticity, boldness and emotional engagement** will rebuild trust in a market tired of predictability.

**Jan Frączek**  
Senior Creative, IGNITE CEE  
Grayling Poland

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## POLISH MARKET PERSPECTIVE

**Polish consumers display conflicting behaviours: they expect convenience and hyper personalisation yet increasingly resist algorithmic predictability. Impulsiveness, spontaneity and a desire for authenticity weaken traditional loyalty, while rising living costs intensify price sensitivity. Predictable communication risks irrelevance in a saturated content environment.**

Brands can regain trust through transparency, emotional connection and community driven experiences. Ethical alignment, cultural relevance and humancentric storytelling strengthen resilience against – price-based – churn and help convert market volatility into competitive advantage.

# ENERGY & SUSTAINABILITY

## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

**Businesses face elevated risks in the year ahead as governments juggle the renewable energy transition with grid capacity, energy price volatility and geopolitical tensions.**

Russia's war in Ukraine is likely to continue to disrupt supply chains, threatening stability, operational reliability and long-term planning.

High energy costs are set to remain a challenge for many businesses in the year ahead, especially in countries such as the UK, Poland and Spain where levels of concern are among the highest.

Across much of Europe, however, the emphasis in 2026 will be scaling up infrastructure to accommodate the rise in green energy and electricity demands driven by the rapid growth of AI and data centres.

In many ways, it will be business as usual for firms; in a climate where trust in information is fragile, authenticity and clarity should be the cornerstone of communications.

The phased rollout of the EU's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive extends to small to medium companies in 2026 and will allow greater public scrutiny of companies' green credentials.

For corporate affairs professionals, the ability to integrate sustainability into core strategy, manage complex reporting requirements and demonstrate genuine resilience will be essential for maintaining competitiveness and a "social license to operate".







**45%**

of all business leaders, said that environmental sustainability will be more of a priority for their corporate communications in 2026

**58%**

of leaders cite government policy as the leading driver of an increased focus on environmental sustainability in communications

**76%**

of business leaders are concerned about the impact of rising energy costs and supply instability

“

**Energy volatility and regulatory expansion demand more than compliance, they require strategic foresight.**

Companies that transparently integrate sustainability into operations, not just communications, will secure both market position and stakeholder confidence in uncertain times.

**Peter Fecko**  
Regional CEO  
Grayling CEE

”

## CEE MARKET PERSPECTIVE

Whilst CEE countries have different energy and sustainability backgrounds, these factors will continue to influence business operations in the region. Historical and, for some, ongoing reliance on Russian sources, along with proximity to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (especially Poland and Romania), increases concerns about energy costs and supply stability compared to other analysed markets.

At the same time, as most CEE countries expand their use of renewables, companies will also continue to place greater emphasis on environmental topics in their communications, driven mostly by government policies and growing consumer interest.

83%

of CEE business leaders are concerned about rising energy costs and supply instability in 2026, slightly above the global average (76%). Concern peaks in Poland (90%) and Romania (87%).

30%

are “very concerned”, with Poland (50%) significantly above the regional average.

48%

expect environmental sustainability to become a higher priority in corporate communications.



**Geopolitical risk, infrastructure stress, and regulatory unpredictability demand proactive action.** Companies that invest in energy resilience and credible ESG frameworks gain both stability and reputational advantage.

**Samu Márcz**  
COO/Head of Public Affairs  
Grayling Hungary



## POLISH MARKET PERSPECTIVE

**Security has become the central driver of Poland's infrastructure and energy policy. The country is entering a phase of major investment in defence related infrastructure, logistics corridors, digital networks and EU supported programs.**

The energy transition requires largescale development of renewables, offshore wind, grid modernisation, storage and SMRs. Growing hyper-war risks demand stronger protection of grids, ports and communications against kinetic, cyber and cognitive threats. Opportunities lie in dual-use technologies, autonomous systems, secure communications and resilient energy solutions.



“

**Security considerations will increasingly shape Poland's infrastructure, energy and digital policy,** placing defence-related investments and dual-use technologies at the core of public spending priorities.

**Paweł Purski**  
Senior Advisor Public Affairs  
Grayling Poland

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# CONCLUSION

**The risks facing businesses in 2026 are, in many respects, broadly familiar.**

Geopolitical tensions and the actions of governments will continue to disrupt economies, unsettle markets and breed uncertainty while the need for brands to act ethically and transparently under the glare of social media will only increase in the year ahead.

But in a world increasingly shaped and driven by technology, corporate reputations are perhaps more fragile than ever.

The adoption of artificial intelligence is set to accelerate with the promise of efficiencies but businesses that fail to embed robust governance or plan for worst-case scenarios, are vulnerable to reputational damage.

Additionally, the threat of cyber attacks and the significant harm that can be inflicted on brands rightly concerns many business leaders.

In a fast-changing world - and a risk landscape that is shifting with equal pace - corporate affairs leaders cannot afford to rely on reactive crisis management.

The need to think ahead and anticipate what might be around the corner has never been more important.

Strategic agility and the need for businesses to cultivate a strong, ethical culture with transparent communication, is an imperative.

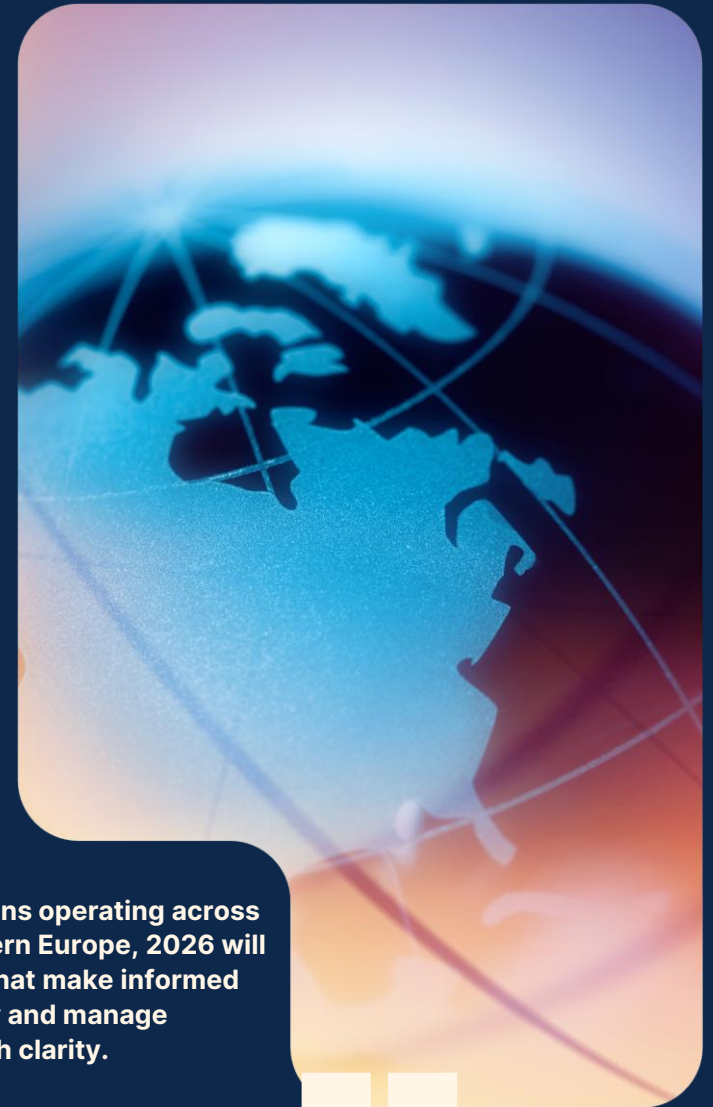
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**For organisations operating across Central & Eastern Europe, 2026 will reward those that make informed decisions early and manage complexity with clarity.**

Resilience, credibility and long-term perspective will be essential.

**Peter Fecko**  
CEE CEO, Grayling

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# GET IN TOUCH

## THANK YOU FOR READING OUR REPORT.

If you'd like to discuss how Grayling can support you in navigating these shifts and strengthening your reputation in 2026, please get in touch with:

**Richard Jukes, Global CEO, Grayling:**  
[Richard.Jukes@Grayling.com](mailto:Richard.Jukes@Grayling.com).

**Peter Fecko, Regional CEO, Grayling CEE:**  
[Peter.FECKO@grayling.com](mailto:Peter.FECKO@grayling.com)

**Klara Banaszewska, General Manager, Grayling Poland:**  
[Klara.Banaszewska@grayling.com](mailto:Klara.Banaszewska@grayling.com)

**Natasa T. Stambak, Managing Director, CEE Region:**  
[Natasa.Trslic@grayling.com](mailto:Natasa.Trslic@grayling.com)

**[CONTACT US](#)**

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creating advantage

## ABOUT GRAYLING

Grayling is the world's local communications agency. With 30 offices around the world, it has the reach, influence and infrastructure of a global agency, with the creativity, connections and cultural know-how of a boutique. Combining a breadth of expertise across consumer, corporate, public affairs, digital and creative services, with proprietary technologies and an inclusive culture, Grayling develops and delivers award-winning communications campaigns that create advantage for its clients. Grayling is part of Accordience, alongside Citigate Dewe Rogerson, Red, and Cirkle.

Find out more at [www.grayling.com](http://www.grayling.com).